

A FAIR SLAVE TO THE MAHDI

By CHAS. EDWARD BARNES. A Tale of Strange Happenings in the Soudan

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Exploring Darkest Africa; three Americans and a girl, Dorothy Stanslaus, fall into the hands of the ferocious Mahdists. Her life is despaired of, when she is rescued by Barford, a Russian prince, who was captured by the Mahdi, but from his captors he is rescued. They get a khalifa's steam yacht and sail down the Nile. After countless perils they near safety.

CHAPTER XXI—(Continued).

There was but a moment in which to break the line, and the prince did not hesitate. Although it was pitch dark, he fired five shots against the barrier in quick succession. Then he looked up. A flash of lightning showed the crowding craft in the wildest confusion. A volley of rifle bullets rattled about him, but the first was ineffectual.

"Straight ahead!" cried Barford to his pilot. "I shall break the line of boats by the time we reach them."

Another roar of the garrison guns and one of the shells carried away the black flag at the prow, another grazed the armored cabin where Dorothy stood at her post. The Aldean listed to port, and the water poured over her deck for a moment.

The prince jammed another cartridge home and thundered his way through the ranks of the opposing forces. "One thing is sure; if I shall ever hit us—"

Crash! came a shot, striking the deck between the solitary gunner and his pilot, plowing it up and throwing the prince that upon his back, stunned and bleeding.

Dorothy gave a cry and ran forward; but the gunner motioned her back under cover and staggered to his feet. She retreated to the helm.

"Stand by your post!" he called out, and throwing himself upon his gun, blazed away again and again full into the closing ranks of the dahabehs till the Aldean was upon them, tearing her way through the barrier with terrific momentum. Then he ran back under cover and seized his rifles.

Fearing that their own allies might be hit, the garrison guns ceased their booming, and the flash of lightning showed the confusion of the struggling dahabehs in their sinking positions. The seven-pounder had done deadly work, and the masts of three of the boats were protruding above the water.

To port and starboard the Aldean struck the wooden craft, but the darkness was so intense and the confusion so appalling that none dared board the runaway till a broadside collision took place, and in the lightning's gleam two or three of the crew leaped upon the Aldean's deck, standing there apparently bewildered.

Crack! crack! went the rifle of Barford. One after another the dahabehs went down before the deadly repeater.

The shrieking and commotion was intense, though for fear of hitting their own men the firing had almost ceased till the Aldean broke through the ranks and dashed into clear water. Then came a perfect fusillade of hot shot.

An inopportune flash of lightning pointed the fleeing craft's place in free water, and the guns of the garrison began their thundering again.

The prince had regained his post at the engines, and was piling in fuel. A shot struck the boiler and sent a hissing jet of hot water and steam into the air. A second and a third volley from the garrison resulted in the destruction of the armored cabin underneath which poor Dorothy lay.

Upon this appalling catastrophe Barford ran forward, feeling sure that his companion had met instant death.

Upon his hands and knees in the roar of hissing steam and the blinding darkness, the prince crept under the twisted and contorted iron superstructure, finding his fair pilot lying upon her face, stunned and unconscious, but breathing faintly. He drew her from under the wreckage and laid her tenderly forward out of the cloud of hissing steam.

The storm was passing, the thunder and lightning had almost abated, but the garrison guns kept up an ineffectual fire.

Three dead dahabehs lay upon the deck. Barford stripped them of their arms and threw the bodies overboard. Then as a fortunate flash of lightning showed the Aldean to be dangerously near the lee shore, the prince ran to the broken tiller and managed to avert the craft into the stream again. Then he returned to Dorothy, who sat up now with her hands pressed to her temples.

"Are you badly hurt?" he asked, dropping by her side.

"I thought I was killed. That shot—that awful bolt—I thought it broke every bone in my body. How my head throbs! Are you speaking? I am so deaf I cannot hear a thing. Don't leave me—"

"You must have something to revive you," and the prince ran for a restorative.

The parched lips drank with eagerness. "Are we out of danger?" he whispered. "Have we passed Berber at last?"

"Yes, thank heaven!" responded the hero. But—

"What is that roaring? Is it in my head or—"

"Escaping steam. The boilers have been hit, and there is no remedy till morning. In the meantime I doubt whether we have fuel enough to plunge through the fifth cataract which we are bound to reach before daybreak."

"God help us!" moaned Dorothy.

"Take courage, my little heroine. We are a long way from defeat yet. Mind you, I only wanted to get by Berber and safely through the fifth cataract, and then we can scuttle the yacht and take to the desert. We have had enough of this. It is a life of warfare, and we aren't prepared for it."

"A miracle, said Dorothy. "Ah, it is a miracle. I thought the blow was struck at last, and that we were lost."

"That thunderstorm was a stroke of Providence. These cowards are not afraid of the muzzle of the cannon's repeater, but thunder and lightning put them to rout. Besides, our seven-pounder sank three of their boats, and placed others in a sad plight. But here; we shall be on shore sooner than we wish if we do not mind our helm."

Suddenly Dorothy's pale face broke through the cloud of steam. "Can you set the pumps to work?" she asked with the calmness of despair.

"Why?" was the asked query.

"Because, from the wish of things through the hole in the deck, yonder,

I judge that the poor Aldean is more than half full of water!"

"My God!" sighed the prince bitterly.

CHAPTER XXII.

Hanging by a Thread.

For the rest of that eventful night the two refugees were in momentary peril of going down with the Aldean. It was not until long after daybreak that the swiftness of the Nile current and the increasing narrowness of the stream inviolated the approach to the fifth cataract.

Then Prince Barford ran forward to survey the prospect.

"Like the looks of things," he said, scanning the heights which they were now skirting. "The river is high, and we have a good chance to shoot the rapids if we can only lighten the boat."

"How far away are we from the cataract?" asked Dorothy.

"An hour at most. We must begin to throw things overboard, or we shall never float over the rocks. It's the worst cataract on the Nile."

Without further hesitation the prince began loosening the big gun from its stanchions.

"It's like losing an old friend," he said bitterly, "and our best defender. But there's no help for it. We may be compelled to take to a plank before another hour is over."

Dorothy watched the loosening of the seven-pounder, which had helped them break through the lines of Berber and had annihilated two fleets of pursuers; and as the long steel tube slid down and disappeared in the Nile, it seemed to bear a portion of her very heart with it.

"Oh, it's not so bad," said he. "We shall soon abandon the ship, for we could never pass Abou Hamed, even if we floated long enough to reach there. Besides, it is better that these guns go overboard than that they should fall into the hands of the enemy."

"The worst of it is, they will sink into the furnace where the last armful of wood."

"We might as well pitch the engines and boilers over next," added the prince.

"Why so?"

"We have reached the end of our fuel and the boilers are weakening with the strain."

"Cut up these carriages. Strip the vessel of the woodwork," suggested Dorothy.

"We need all that for a raft. Mind you, if we go to pieces in the middle of the fifth cataract, we must reach shore, and with our provisions, too."

"The worst of it is, they will sink into the furnace where the last armful of wood."

The pumps had cleared the hold below decks of the swishing water, and the best time for the sacrifice seemed to have arrived. The prince straightway began unbolting the boiler stays from the deck.

A herculean task, but with his hero industry it was soon accomplished. First one and then the other of the huge boilers were toppled over upon the deck's edge, listing the Aldean to a dangerous degree. Then they went overboard. The engines followed piece-meal, and thus the Aldean soon had herself without the power of a locomotive or resistance against even a dehabeh.

A sense of helplessness came over the runaways, and they realized the desperation of their case. There was no time to repine, however, and the construction of the raft was begun in earnest.

"Our lives on a toss of a shilling," remarked the prince, as he spiked a small chest to the center of the raft and began filling it with their necessities.

Then, when all was done, he said to his companion: "Comrade, let us enjoy our last breakfast on board the Aldean. It may be the last for a locomotive."

"Don't say 'forever' broke in Dorothy, with quivering lips. Then, after a moment: "Do you know, the thought of leaving the Aldean, after she has borne us safely to this haven of refuge, distresses me more than I can tell. Does it affect you at all?"

"I dare not give way to sentiment," said the prince. "The Aldean has done us good service, but there is no use clinging to her from an impulse of gratitude. All I want to do is to shoot the cataract and get as far along toward Abou Hamed as possible. We have trusted ourselves to the water long enough. We are getting into a more or less neutral country. The people here are not to be sure, but not so rabid and fanatical as those farther south, under the immediate influence of the Mahdi, or his successor. I think I shall be able to handle them when the time comes."

Dorothy was scanning the cliffs of sandstone, which seemed to have been cleft by the steadily flowing Nile at remote period, and now towered above them like white hooded sentinels. Suddenly she saw the prince's face blanch, as he slammed down the lid of the provision chest, and ran forward to the tiller ropes.

"Stand by," he commanded. "It will take two to manage this wreck through the cataract."

Dorothy crept under cover and took her position. From her point of vantage she saw the writhing, seething cataract not a mile ahead. The river was so narrow that it appeared to pour its huge volume through a mighty funnel. To make matters worse, here and there in the foam-flecked mass could be seen points of rock.

"Keep to the right of the channel!" commanded the prince; "keep to the right and avoid the rocks. It is a dangerous pass, but the only one."

"God save us!" murmured Dorothy.

The prince leaned over the prow and noted that the Aldean was as high out of water as could be expected—fully six inches higher than before the stripping of the craft of her guns and machinery.

"That means our salvation," he muttered. Then they plunged into the roar and turmoil of the cataract, and the poor shot-battered Aldean began a dance of death in the lashing Nile.

After once encountering the cataract, the force of the waters was so great that the rudder was useless. Now listing to port, now careening to starboard, the wreck was clutched in the powerful grip of the currents, whirled around and around, and then shot out of the seething maelstrom stern foremost, until it struck upon a half submerged rock.

Strained every beam and seam from garboard strake to deck buttress. Then the waves broke over the craft, tore her from her tenuous anchorage, and plunged her onward with a mighty fury.

By a superhuman effort the prince managed to creep back and reach the little shelter where Dorothy was still clinging to the tiller ropes.

"She won't stand this pounding long," cried the prince above the roar of the cataract. "We might as well prepare for a swim. If I could only get the raft loose, I would lash you to it and trust to luck."

The rest of the sentence was lost in a crash. Barford ran forward. The Aldean's bow had been stove in, and the craft was rapidly settling.

"That's our death warrant!" cried he. "She'll go down in a minute, now."

"To the raft, then!" Dorothy sprang forward through knee-deep water.

A great coil of rope wound around the life raft, and upon it the heroine was lashed, in a position where she might cling to the chest, already secured to the flooring. The vessel was settling slowly, and the raft was working itself free from the Aldean.

A sudden lurch of the vessel dashed the raft against the deck. Then the Aldean careened to starboard and went down. The raft with the two clinging refugees shot out from its mooring and sped down the channel with terrific speed.

It was fortunate, indeed that no obstruction was met, or the raft would never have survived the mad torrent.

"Now for the final plunge," cried Barford, gazing through the drenching spray toward a great wall of water that loomed up before them. "Cling for your life! If we pass that we shall reach open water and be saved."

The sentence was broken short, for the raft seemed suddenly to have been lifted by some submarine monster and hurled through the air. Then it was dashed head foremost into a seething wall of waves, which lifted its formidable crest like a towering fender before them.

Dorothy was completely overcome for a moment, and when she recovered consciousness she found herself lying flat on her back on the raft in comparatively still water.

"Comrade," called out Dorothy weakly; "comrade, are you here?"

There came no answer. Dorothy struggled up and looked wildly about her. Then it came with crushing force. "My God!" she moaned, "the prince is lost—lost and drowned!"

An appalling desolation and sense of helplessness came over her. She saw only the towering chalk cliffs sweeping the sky on either side, and heard only the whispering of the waters through the narrow channel. For some time she lay there, unable to move, with hope dead in her young heart, praying for a speedy end.

But soon there came a weak cry from afar. With something of wonder and alarm, the girl struggled up and gazed over the turmoil of waters. There, across the river, she saw her brave comrade.

Dorothy tried to raise her voice, but the sound was too weak. It was only after a little time that the prince revived sufficiently to sit up and gaze despairingly over the Nile in search of his fair charge. When he caught a glimpse of Dorothy, still upon the raft, he drew himself up and gave a shout. "Safe, comrade!" he cried across the water. "Are you safe?"

"Yes, thank God!" responded Dorothy. "That solace seemed to put new life into the soldier's heart; and after a little time he dived into the stream and struck out for the opposite shore."

For a while it looked as if he were going to make it, but the current was so swift that the swimmer's strength began to wane.

Dorothy encouraged him as he battled against the current. She could see the straining white arms and the blood-shot eyes. Inch by inch she watched the soldier fighting against the current, laboring to gain the goal before the swift waters should bear him on around the verge of a great cliff. It was a vain struggle, however. With a final wave of the hand the poor fellow sank, just as he was borne around the edge of the towering cliff. For a full hour Dorothy sat there like a statue. After a time she rallied and cut herself loose from the raft. The bark which had been her temporary refuge had edged its way to shore so that she was enabled to step from the raft to the rocks and feel the solid earth beneath her for the first time since leaving Khartoum.

Seating herself amid the ragged edging of boulders, the brave woman began to think of what was to be done. She could pry open the chest and find food enough for some days, doubtless, and even if the prince did not succeed immediately in making his way back to her, as she felt that he certainly would sooner or later, she could survive the struggle and turmoil, nature interposed and Dorothy sank upon the sands, covered her face and soon fell into sound slumber.

She awoke with a start in answer to a voice. She could not seem to realize whence it came. She looked up to see a beckoning figure on the summit of the towering cliff above her.

"Heaven be praised!" she exclaimed. She leaped up and waved her hands exultantly. "It is he! It is the prince!"

Then the girl asked herself how on earth did he ever gain that inaccessible summit?

Rushing about on the sands, the lone watcher was suddenly amazed to see the figure, so far above her, lowering something over the cliff that appeared to be a slender cord, from which was suspended a rock. Down and down it came, and yard after yard and rod after rod, till finally Dorothy ran to the spot where the dangling end was to land, and discovered that the stone was bound round with telegraph wire.

"Make fast," was the order from above, "and I will lower another wire and haul you up."

Dorothy did as she was commanded, and soon another wire was seen dangling over the cliff and descending to her. Tied to the end of this was the key to the chest.

"Comrade," was the next order, "let me first haul up the arms and ammunition, then what food there is left. I will take the prince's chest to the summit, and we can fight our way to Su-kim now."

Dorothy found the ammunition in their sealed boxes perfectly preserved; and, though much of the food was water soaked, it was too precious to throw away on that account. One by one the loads went up the cliff.

"Now bind the right wire around your waist and make fast," came the final order from above, "and begin to climb up the cliff hand over hand on the left wire. Take it slowly, and I am sure the wire will hold."

"Are you ready?" came the call a little later.

Dorothy had made a noise in one wire. She sat in it and answered: "Ready!"

Then she took hold of the other wire and pulled herself up hand over hand, while the prince took in the slack of the wire upon which she was sitting. For a time all went well. Slowly, without jerking or sudden halts, the slender wire drew her up and up and up, and between the pauses Dorothy looked about her.

A sudden faintness soon began to come over her. The appalling height, the slender thread that dangled her between heaven and earth, life and eternity, and the consciousness of waning strength, began to tell upon her courage. In the very midst of this herculean task, Barford's eyes happened to glance up the Nile toward the cataract, and his heart sank at the sight of four dahabehs loaded down with armed dervishes, thundering down the rapids in pursuit of the refugees. It seemed but a moment before the pursuers were abreast of the spot and had caught sight of the dangling atom of humanity swinging between heaven and earth far up the cliff side, though the prince himself was beyond their detection.

Suddenly there arose a chorus of shrieks through the cavernous Nile bed, a volley of rifle shots rang out like the cracking of twigs in a fierce gale, and then the strain upon the slender wire was suddenly relaxed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A Struggle on the Brink of Eternity.

A very strange thing had happened to Dorothy Stanslaus. Unconscious of the peril she was in from the dervishes, who were trying to kill her with their rifles, she was struggling to gain the summit of the cliff, when suddenly she looked up and saw a white face peering at her from the solid rock above. It was climbing, there was thrust a hand—a human hand, old and withered.

The girl felt herself dragged into a cave, where she sank down before a score of graybeards, each in his dark cowl, their eyes gleaming with wildness.

It was a long time before Prince Barford could summon up the courage to drag himself to the verge of the precipice and peer into the depths to ascertain the fate of his beloved comrade.

When he saw the conclusion that Dorothy had fallen and been dashed to pieces, or else that she had been seized by the enemy and borne away. And yet the latter idea seemed quite impossible. The dahabehs could never have paused in their mad race and picked up their prize. Whether, then, had poor Dorothy disappeared?

Suddenly, to his astonishment, there came a tug at the wire, and, looking down, Barford was amazed to see a little fluttering bit of muslin tied to the end. The prince breathlessly drew the strange message up, and, seizing it, read: "Monks' cave midway down. Come, quick!"

For a few moments this strange and unexpected rescue seemed beyond belief. Then, letting down a coil of wire, which he had cut from the telegraph post, he came to the conclusion that the brave man made the perilous descent until he found himself dangling before a series of windows cut in the solid crag—portals to the cave temples of the hermit monks of the Nile.

"Come in here, quick!" A white hand shot out to his rescue.

"What a Godsend! what a miracle!" was all the prince could gasp as he crept into the great temple and confronted there a score of white-haired fathers, staid in spectral splendor, perfectly motionless and dumbfounded.

For a moment the newcomer could not speak. Then seeing a face which looked as if it were that of one of his own countrymen, he spoke in clear, slow Russian: "Holy father, God be blessing you!"

With the sound of their native language, half the monks rushed forward. The patriarchal father advanced and offered his hand, which the prince gratefully kissed. The other monks, however, remained silent.

"My son," were the first words of the grave friar, "thou art welcome. But—"

He turned toward Dorothy—"thou knowest the rules of our order. It is unlawful that any woman shall set foot in this sacred temple. Thou must take her away, instantly."

For the moment the prince was bewildered. Dorothy did not understand a word, but she divined her position.

"Holy father," said Barford, "know that I am a prince of the blood, by right of birth a dignitary of the holy Russian Church, which has sent thee here to fulfill the vows of chastity and lifelong penance. Know also, though this may seem to thee a woman in heart and soul, strength and courage, she exceeds any man I ever knew, and is worthy of thy hospitality. I was enabled by the grace of God to rescue her from the Moslem hordes through stratagem; and we have fought our way through fire and flood, through starvation and peril, until suddenly in our feast of extremity we happen upon thy good grace and hospitality. If the God who bids thee to the desert hath also led His helpless ones to seek shelter beneath thy wing, holy father, deny us not; but in His name perform thy duty as becomes a patriarch of the church, and heaven shall reward thee mightily."

Duty and pity struggled in the old monk's heart. After a moment's meditation, he drew his brothers aside, and a solemn converse in whispers decided the fate of the visitors.

"Prince," said the graybeard, returning to the prince's cell, "a woman has been rescued from the accused Moslem land; but under the conditions that thy companion remain silent—that she speak no word to any brother here, that she be called 'Brother Paul,' and in all things treated as a man and a brother. Have I thy promise, prince?"

"Be it as thou wilt," answered the stranger, again kneeling and clasping the holy father's hand thankfully. Then he turned to poor Dorothy, and told her, in whispers the equality of silence imposed upon her.

"Fear nothing," she said, pressing her lips to the prince's cheek. "Fear nothing, for I shall be faithful."

Such food as the monks were permitted to eat on days of especial feasting was brought—dates, dried figs, a kind of shew bread, and a jug of most exquisite Russian liquor. The two visitors sat down and ate and drank in silence.

Dorothy was delighted with the spiritual repose of the holy sanctuary. After she had partaken of the food she

crept to one side and sank down upon the hard floor.

A good father brought to the prince a pillow of husks. "Give our good brother Paul thy comforter," he said. Forthwith he turned away and left the girl and her protector together.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" sighed Dorothy, hardly realizing that good fortune had come upon them. "You will thank the fathers for their mercy and kindness, will you not, comrade?"

"Be at peace," said her companion. "Sleep here in quiet, while I climb back to the summit of the crag and put our arms and effects in hiding, that no one may discover our whereabouts."

The prince made the dangerous ascent without mishap. There he gathered up the contents of the chest, which he had hauled up from the shore of the Nile, and found a safe hiding place for their precious stores.

Barford had no more than succeeded in secreting the last vestige of the treasure trove, than, on returning to the verge of the precipice, he was amazed to find two dervishes, armed with the wires which hung over the edge.

To his horror the prince discovered one of them to be no less a personage than the emir who had planned the kidnapping of the "angel of light" in Khartoum.

This dignitary had been one of the first in pursuit. Finding that the Aldean had been abandoned, and recognizing his prize dangling in midair as he shot down the Nile, he had made a landing and returned to the spot with all haste.

"So," he was overheard to say, "that Russian Ghauri and the 'angel' have taken refuge in the caves of the accursed monks. Well, we must root them out."

"But how?" was the query of his companion.

"You a faithful son of one of the faithful, and ask how? Go to! These dogs of monks are never armed, while we—" he patted his belt full of knives and pistols. "Nothing easier, I will let you down on these wires, and you make your demands at the pistol's muzzle. If you meet with resistance, shoot them down—the whole dastardly pack. Are you ready?"

The prince listened to the conversation, then ran back to his hiding place and armed himself. When he returned he found the emir and his man in a violent argument. The emir first pleaded, "Go, he threatened."

"Go, dog," he cried, "or I will run you through like a Christian. By Allah! you are no better than a white face!"

"Down with you and the reward shall be yours. Take the temple by storm, I command you. I will bring you safe back. Bind the 'angel' and I will draw her safely to the summit. Fear nothing. I shall not let you fall. Go while it is yet time."

With many misgivings the underling did the will of his master; but it was as a man who goes to his death in pursuit of his duty. No sooner had he begun the descent down the cliff, than Prince Barford came up behind the Mahdist commander and threw a coil of loose wire about him.

The emir turned and saw his predicament. Both hands supported his friend, and before him was an armed man, calm and commanding.

A terrible crash escaped him. At first he tried to leap aside, but a sudden wrenching of the coils brought him to his knees. Seeing that in order to save his own life it was necessary to sacrifice that of his ally, the emir let go the wires suddenly, and threw off the coil by which Barford had plighted him.

The prince now found himself face to face with the most formidable adversary whom he had ever met.

The prince rushes upon the emir with drawn sword. The latter discharges a pistol full into the Russian's face, but misses him. The weapon is struck from the emir's hand with a back slap of Barford's sword. The emir draws his own gleaming blade, and the two fight there on the verge of eternity like savages.

Each is trying to back the other to the edge of the cliff, where a false step means death. The Mahdist matters while he fights:

"So, dog of a ghauri; this is the way that you reward me for saving your life, is it?"

"Then with each a furious slash of the sword, "Take that—and that!"

"And so, hound of a Mahdist," responds the prince, "this is the manner in which you reward me for having saved your life. Take that—and that—and that!"

But both lunges fall short. Finally, with a terrific clashing of swords, the prince's unfortunately snaps off close to the hilt.

The emir gives a fierce chuckle and his teeth gleam as he makes a quick lunge. Barford stumbles over a coil of wire, and in the very madness of the moment, seizes it. The dervish is down upon him like a whirling sword, and, grasping his side, but in the mix-up the Christian manages to throw the coil about the emir's neck, and with a mighty tug tightens the wire about his enemy's throat. His face becomes perfectly purple, and he falls to his knees.

Barford is upon him in an instant, crushing him to the earth. He wrenches the sword from the mighty clench, and the weapon breaks off short. Then the hand to hand tussle begins in deadly earnest.

Round and round the emir the smothering coils tighten, like a serpent's, and he begins to weaken. Nearer and nearer the verge of the precipice the contest advances, until, with a sudden and unexpected blow, Barford is struck down at the very edge of the awful chasm.

Had the emir been half free at this terrible moment, the game would have been his. But in making the second lunge to drive his adversary over the cliff, he stumbled in the coil and falls prostrate upon Barford.